

I Wish the Preacher Would Talk About... **Will I Go to Heaven?**

Revelation 21:1-6

August 28, 2022

A hospital room: one of those places where pretense evaporates, and vulnerability is unavoidable. I have found that in such places, we speak differently. We choose our words more carefully. When the fragility of life and the inevitability of earthly death are a palpable presence in the room, we choose our words carefully. We speak differently. The unspoken questions that weigh on us all of the time take on a greater urgency in those spaces, in those moments.

It was last summer. A hospital room. The air was still heavy with the doctor's words. *Terminal. Nothing more we can do. I'll give you a little time with your pastor.* As the doctor walked out of the room, the patient reached for both of my hands in his. *There are some things I want to tell you, Pastor. I've made some mistakes in my life. My faith has wavered, sometimes for years at a time. My question is this: Can God forgive me now? What comes next? Terminal?*

Will I go to heaven?

Words flashed through my mind. I thought about the pamphlets that sometimes appear in our mailbox or get handed out at large sporting events. The tone of absolute certainty that they contain. A step-by-step roadmap to eternal life. Do this. Say that. Believe this.

My mind raced. I thought about the questions children ask. I thought about our own son Ben who had recently asked me, "Who will be our grown-ups when you and Mom die? Will you come back to take care of us?"

There are moments when we should choose our words carefully, when we should speak differently.

This is the last sermon of our series approaching questions and topics that you've asked the preacher to address. I'm not sure why I saved this particular question for last. But this is also the last sermon of my thirties, so perhaps it is appropriate to be preaching about the end of life. Seems a little closer than it once did.

Throughout the month of August, one of the intentions behind this series has been to remind us all that questions are a constitutive, central part of the journey of faith. That doubt is not the opposite of faith, but an essential part of it. That in this space, doubters and question-askers are invited and welcome. And that we should not restrict the questions that can be asked in here. For this is the space that can hold our most difficult and delicate doubts. Indeed, this space holds the depth of our hearts.

Ask almost any pastor whether they would prefer to officiate a wedding or a memorial service and they are likely—perhaps to your surprise—to name the latter. There are varieties of reasons for this, but first among them is this incredible privilege we have when we gather in a sacred space, and we speak words of divine promise. We bless those who have passed from this life with words of scripture and the promises of faith. We surround a grieving family with the love and support that comes from our shared faith. In many services those words include the final verse of the 23rd Psalm: "I will live in the house of the Lord forever."

I thought of that verse in the hospital room last summer. "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." What does that mean? The honest answer is

that I do not know. When it comes to descriptions of our ultimate destination, certainty eludes me.

What I do have, what I *do* have are these words, holy words, words of witness and truth. What I do have, what I *do* have is scripture, scripture that gives us these glimpses, these images, these stories, these promises written by and spoken to those who, like you and me, struggle with doubt, those whose questions weigh heavy upon us.

Glimpses. Images. Stories. Promises. Revelation: a book of vision. Revelation: a letter filled with vivid metaphors and striking images designed to grab hold of its audience. There are dragons, seven-headed beasts, and—my personal favorite—one that looks like a leopard, except it has the feet of a bear, the mouth of a lion, and huge horns. I'm not sure where the leopard fits into all of that. To their original audience, which was Christians living in cities that belonged to the Roman empire, these creatures would have signified great power, strength, and dominion, authority. They are the hallmarks of empire, and these marginalized, ostracized, alienated, outcast churches on the outskirts of the Roman world would know them quite well. They lived in constant fear of these terrible monsters. The dragon of forced imperial worship. Bow down before the emperor or suffer the consequences. The two-headed beast of persecution and torture.

Surrounded by the dominant forces of Rome and the seemingly inexhaustible authority of Emperor Domitian, exiled on the island of Patmos, John opens a window to the truth beyond the visible realm. John gives us a snapshot of how it all ends—not to evoke fear. Certainly not to provide a step-by-step roadmap to heaven. But rather to shine a light of hope into a situation of despair. You see, all those beasts and angels, all that destruction and fire...they serve a purpose. They give assurance of God's power.

John intended for his readers to find great comfort in knowing how it all ends. I'm being reminded that the Christian narrative, the story we tell, has an ending, a purpose, a destination. This is true for individuals,

for communities, and—in the Book of Revelation—for all of creation. There is great freedom in that, freedom to live without fear or anxiety about where we're headed or when it's all coming to an end.

When our son Samuel was three years old, I took him on a trip to Austin, Texas, just the two of us. We traveled together. We were fortunate enough to be aboard an airplane with seatback video screens on each seat. So, we each sat down, put on our headphones, and made our entertainment selections—a Warren Buffet documentary for me and *Finding Dory* for Samuel. I didn't even think about the fact that the movie might be a bit upsetting until through my headphones I heard Samuel gasp and yell, "Oh no! Dory got captured!" Worried that I was traumatizing my young son, I took off my headphones and prepared to explain to him that the movie was "just pretend." But before I could say a word, Sam continued, "But it's okay, Daddy. At the end, she comes back. I already know that." Now, Sam had never seen this particular movie, but he had seen enough kids' movies to know how it would inevitably end. And (spoiler alert) he was right.

When you know the end of the story, you are released from fear. When you know the end of the story, you can embrace the present, knowing that the future is already secure. When you know the end of the story, you can make the most of the moments you have without anxiety about what comes next. When you know the end of the story, you can live the present in faith. The Revelation of John is a vision of the end that frees us to live in the now.

In John's vision, here is how it all ends. We are not carried away into the heavenly realm. We are not whisked into the sweet by and by. No, in the Revelation of John, the holy city of God comes down. "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." In the vision of John, all that divides us in this world will be broken down and put away in God's city. It is a vision of unity we need so badly in our time and place. For the gates of the holy city are never shut, allowing free entry for all God's children.

The gifts of healing and life will be available to all. There is a river flowing through the center of the city. That river gives water of life to all who are thirsty. There is a tree in the center of the city. That tree provides fruit and healing for the people of God.

What John sees is a vision of a world made new—new heaven, new earth, new creation, new city, new people. The end that John envisions looks strikingly like the beginning. So much so that I have to wonder if the destination to which we are headed looks very much like the place it all started. That makes sense—our source and our ending, our alpha and our omega, they are the same. And so, at the deepest level, Revelation affirms a promise that we Presbyterians repeat frequently: in life and in death, we belong to God. When we know how it ends, we can live in hope no matter the circumstance. When we trust God with the future, we are freed to do our part with the time we have been given. We are freed from an understanding of God as capricious or vindictive, who dangles salvation before us as a means of ensuring obedience, or hoards salvation from us.

When the questions are most urgent and the answers are least clear, I have learned to say what I know. Here is what I know, what I say to my sons, to myself, to you. God is love. God is gracious. God is faithful. In the end, God's will is done. And God's will is life. In scripture, God's most persistent command to us is this one: Do not be afraid.

Last fall, on an impossibly beautiful afternoon, I parked my car in the cemetery. I put on my robe, and I joined a grieving family in a simple ritual of prayers and sturdy words of scripture. As I spoke the words committing our brother to his final resting place, a strong breeze stirred up. It began to blow the pages of my liturgy and the sleeves of my robe. And I had to pause a moment to find my place in the scattered pages. And, as I did, my eyes connected with the eyes of a nine-year-old holding her mother's hand, courageously standing next to the grave of her grandfather, her hair blowing in the breeze. And when I looked at her eyes, I can't explain it, but in

that moment I knew that resurrection is not some metaphysical reality, God not some abstract truth. I knew that death had already had the only moment it gets, that what comes next is life, is life abundant, true, eternal life. I knew it not because I understood it. I knew it because there was a catch in my throat. I knew it because of the beating of my heart. I knew it because of a nine year old's smile, that everything we fear will be defeated. That all will be well.

In the end, there is God. Only God. Leading us beside still waters and in paths of righteousness. Walking right beside us in the valleys of darkness and death. Comforting us in moments of fear and uncertainty. Reassuring us with a promise to which we can tether our lives. I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Don't be afraid. Amen.

